New Questions, Next Work

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Abstract

This brief, invited "metareflection" identifies the most exciting questions in digital humanities and cultural heritage as those opened up by a potential redistribution of power and redesign of our social and technological infrastructure inspired by Black Studies, arts, and digital practice. What might it mean to shift from extractive and controlled modes of digital research and curation to ones that are generative, healing, and truly open-ended? What will happen if we succeed in empowering and centering individuals, collections, and community concerns that have long been marginalized? What might the DH community build next, if we make necessary changes in capital, focus, and control — and embrace the shaping role of the choices that each of us make within living systems every day?

The necessary project of *reshaping and reforming our digital humanities and cultural heritage infrastructure* — along the more liberatory, generative, reparative, equitable, and critically informed lines of what Jessica Marie Johnson calls "Black digital practice" — has barely begun [Johnson2018].

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By *infrastructure*, I mean the full suite of social and technological systems that converge in DH and the work of memory institutions: platforms and tools, certainly; but also systems of selection, arrangement, and description of cultural materials deemed worthy of attention — and the practices that shape those decisions at scale, distributing or reifying authority, security, and privilege. These latter range from our very conception of how funding and resourcing can function in this sphere, to our practices of hiring, evaluating scholars for tenure and promotion, and instituting organizational habits and patterns that either retain and uplift people of color or harm and drive them away. It is tempting to frame this complex and eroded infrastructure — in all its overwhelming fullness — as something the present generation of DH scholars, librarians, archivists, museum workers, technologists, and administrators has simply inherited and must drag along. But that would be to diminish the shaping role of the choices we make within living systems, every day.

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There is no longer any excuse for disengagement with what an activist Black or Africana studies offers the digital humanities. Black scholarship and organizing on the one hand, and human survival and flourishing on the other are deeply interlinked. Professions and institutions that persist in old patterns without surcease — despite overwhelming evidence that change is needed and a better world is possible — participate in the same willfully self-destructive logics that drive environmental degradation, piss-poor pandemic response, and emboldened White supremacy.

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I offer here — as an invited "meta-reflection" — a brief set of concepts and concerns that have become most meaningful to me as an academic and administrator, in setting my own agendas and the organizational ones I am able to influence.

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1. First, thanks to scholars like Johnson, Moya Bailey, Kim Gallon, Marisa Parham, and Safiya Noble, we can feel increasingly confident that an unfruitful techno-utopianism in DH is well and truly dead. It is now evident that the same tools and systems that make generative and counter-cultural Black digital practice possible have the potential to be (or already are) technologies of misrepresentation and misogynoir, of the continued quantification of BIPOC bodies, and of surveillance and control.

   But that is not to say that more hopeful, technological futures have been foreclosed. I hang my hopes on a

core tenet of Afrofuturism, as outlined by Kodwo Eshun and other artists and thinkers: that *the primary marker of a people's autonomy lies in their ability to craft and control their own, collective intellectual infrastructure*. I therefore ask: what generational imaginations will be liberated, for the benefit of everyone, when cultural heritage systems, digital libraries, and techno-social platforms of all kinds are built around new philosophies of organization and community ownership — for instance, no longer on progress narratives and master-slave or parent-child paradigms, or on admin/moderator-based models of control, but on frameworks with roots in *ubuntu*, cooperatively governed, holistically understood, and nurtured to new ends?

The implications for our digital libraries, archives, museums, and research infrastructures are extreme. As just one example — which, inspired by Rasheedah Phillips, I have explored in a number of talks and essays — truly supporting Black futures will not only require ceding ownership over history and its digital delivery mechanisms, but even challenging regulated, linear time.

2. Doing this needed design work requires *a fundamental shift, not only in institutional but in personal control*. I believe that the majority-white generation of leaders who presently dominate cultural heritage and DH need to make this shift possible, by deliberately leveraging our power and privilege to resource Black-led projects and to position BIPOC, queer, and other minoritized colleagues as voices of authority. Then, most importantly, we need to get out of the way.

The same systems that have positioned us to do this work will — at a moment when "diversity" efforts have become institutionally trendy — reinforce and reward our remaining in loci of power past our usefulness in supporting others. Alternately, such systems will remove us prematurely when it becomes evident we do not support *them*. Therefore, we must commit to the project, wherever it takes us. It is also crucial we recognize and vocally acknowledge that our (perhaps newly) good and earnest intent does not wipe away past harms or preclude new ones, nor does it substitute for the embodied experiences and deep expertise of scholars and archivists of Black culture.

3. *Capital, too, can be shifted*, as we have recently seen through the altered priorities and patterns of decision-making that have come with changes in leadership in our major funding agencies. This shift needs to happen in our libraries, digital humanities centers, museums, and archives as well — for budgets are moral documents. Resourcing cannot productively proceed along the charity-based frameworks that groups like the Shift Collective identify as problematic in funding community archives, and which have propped up what *INCITE!* terms the "nonprofit industrial complex" [Incite! Women of Color Against Violence]. Scholars of race, class, and labor (whose work reinforces the expressed, lived experiences of presumed beneficiaries of such partnerships and gifts) demonstrate compellingly that large organizations too often work against their ostensible and noble aims — serving instead to extract resources and, in the case of nonprofits, not to elevate dissent, but to channel and quell it.

Instead, robust networks of *mutual aid* — based in equity and reciprocity, and meeting actual, core needs of our communities — are as necessary in DH and digital libraries as they are in the urban and rural settings of our failing state. The daily maintenance and long-term sustainability of digital humanities projects (not merely as technical systems but as *human* ones) is an unsolved problem in our institutions and town-gown collaborations as currently configured. Top-down funding models, well directed, can spark desperately needed, momentary change — but may never sustain nor truly serve the goals of a new, grassroots Black digital practice.

4. Most fundamentally, *we do not know what will happen* if we succeed in empowering and centering people, collections, and community concerns that have long been marginalized. We don't know *what* true shifts in resources and authority might bring. We don't know what an Afrofuturist digital discovery and cultural heritage platform might look like — because we have never had one. New scholars and practitioners of the digital humanities in search of research questions may find *these* the most exciting, over-arching ones in

our field.

The intersection of Black studies with DH and digital cultural heritage reminds us to think across time and globally, through the Diaspora — understanding that abolition, memory, the creation and use of tools, and the political, ecological, and interdisciplinary projects of decolonization are on trajectories long and broad. We have pathways forward and tantalizing hints, but can scarcely imagine what it will mean to shift from extractive modes of digital research and curation — quantifying, fragmenting, pinning, hoarding — to ones that are generative, healing, open-ended, and which make us whole. What might we build next?

Works Cited

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